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GRIEF IS NOT A SIGN OF WEAKNESS

Steps in the Grief Process

Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is, rather a healthy and fitting response to a loss, a tribute to a loved one who has died. Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain. Nether approach leads to healing. Allow grief to have its way for a while; then, gradually, you can release yourself from its grip. Recognition of the appropriateness and value of grief is the first step in accepting the reality of loss. Acceptance, in turn is the first sign of recovery.

Each of us is different, but for most people, grieving follows a pattern. We do not all experience every phase, nor do we move through the grief process at the same pace or with the same intensity. The following characteristics constitute the basic elements of the grief experience. Reviewing this list might help you to identify your own grief pattern and help you anticipate what you yet have to experience.

Shock

A period of numbness usually follows a loved one's death. One can feel stunned, in a trance. It can last only minutes, but it can also persist for days or longer. This state of shock allows a person time to absorb what has happened, and to begin to adjust. People sometimes use tranquilizers to extend this period. There is also a tendency to leave decision-making to others.

Emotional Upheaval

As the shock wears off, grief gives rise to a variety of other emotions. When such feelings seem overwhelming, we do well to defer major decisions. Other grievers and counselors can help us interpret and deal with these feelings. As we come to understand what we experience, we can find appropriate ways to ventilate our emotions and to channel them to our advantage.

Panic

The death of a loved one makes the future uncertain. We might panic in the face of the unknown and fear of "going it alone". Panic prevents concentration and defers acceptance of the finality of death. It tempts us to run from life, to avoid people and to refuse to try new things. Patience with ourselves and a willingness to accept help from others will enable us to subdue panic and outgrow our confusion.

Guilt

Many people fault themselves in connection with a loved one's death. We have all made mistakes in our relationships and sincere regret is the best response to these mistakes. However, self-reproach out of proportion to our behavior can affect our mental health and impede our recovery from grief. Close friends and/or a trusted counselor can aid us in confronting and dealing with guilt feelings, whether justified or exaggerated.

Hostility

People in grief naturally ask, "Why?" "Why him/her?" "Why now?" "Why like this?" Most of these questions have no answers. Frustration then causes us to feel resentment and anger. We want someone to blame; God, doctors, clergy, ourselves, even the person who died. If we can accept the lack of answers to "Why?", we may begin to ask, instead, what we can do to grow through what has happened. Then we have started to move beyond anger towards hope.